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TALKING BACK

Sex and the Young Adult Catholic College Student

A further commentary on the “hook-up” culture

By Richard G. Malloy, S.J.

Look, Fr. Rick, no disrespect or nothing but I'm doing stuff the Catholic Church doesn't want me to do. So my going to Mass would be hypocritical." He doesn't want the Eucharist. He wants the constant and crazy drinking and sexual practices ubiquitous on college campuses.

Attracting young adults when the cultural practices of their present life stage seemingly contradict an authentic following of Jesus, is the pastoral challenge for those of us who minister to and with the young. These days, we face some new permutations when offering

youth true life in Christ. This generation of young adults saw the child molester *Fr. Fellatio* featured as a character on *Mad TV* as they were growing up and the real priest sex scandals have certainly done damage. Still, there are even deeper currents carrying them away from Mass.

Throughout history young people were married and parenting almost as soon as their sexual equipment was operative. Now twelve to fourteen year olds' bodies are hormonally raging while their culture instructs them to put off marriage until they are in their late twenties or early thirties. All constraints culture used to put in place to keep boys and girls apart, from dances where Sr. Mother Superior would walk around telling

the kids to leave room for the Holy Spirit to single sex dorms without visitation privileges, have gone the way of the electric typewriter. "Grinding" on the dance floor does not refer to making coffee.

The church has much to offer young adults, but our young people have never heard it. Many vociferously tell politicians to do something about *Roe v. Wade* (which, if ever overturned, will just throw the question back to the States). Yet I have listened to hundreds of young adults who admit no one, no parent or friendly, admirable adult has ever spoken to them about their development of character and moral formation in the area of sex.

The kids watch thousands of hours of shows like *Two and a*

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Half Men and *The Big Bang*, all of which are just long, predictable arguments that what matters in life is “getting laid,” while we fail to offer a counter narrative more attractive and

Oral sex has become no more meaningful nor less prevalent than the good-night kiss

meaningful. *Animal House* and *American Pie: Beta House* form their social imaginations of college, yet we expect them to be able to assume the responsibility of young Christians to live sexually free, responsible and loving lives with no aid from their elders. Eighteen-year-olds hit campus and are thrown into the tsunami of beer, babes, bodies and beds. And we wonder why they don't show up at Mass.

Oppressive hook up culture roams and stalks their souls and we say little to nothing in response. Many freshman orientation programs warn of “STIs” and date rape scenarios, but do little to help young adults explore and understand the joys and demands of honest communication and loving relationships. To “hook up” means solely physical sex, everything from kissing to full genital encounters, all with no meaning, no further expectations, no romance and certainly no love. The really revolutionary attitudes and practices surrounding oral sex — it has become no more meaningful or less prevalent than the good night kiss — have thrust young people into engaging in behaviors they are quite ambivalent about the next day.

Many, both male and female, are profoundly dissatisfied and distressed about what they perceive to be the expectations of their peers

surrounding sexual behavior. The prevailing perceived ideology is that sex is best had often, “hot” and with no strings attached. The sad reality is that not only are so many having mindless, meaningless sex; they also are having a lot of bad sex, unsatisfying on many levels, from the lack of romance and tenderness to the rather pleasure-less and embarrassing humping of horny bodies too inebriated to perform. Theology of the Body programs with a retro emphasis on outdated gender roles (one version speaks of the man as a Knight treating the woman as a Princess who is the daughter of the King, i.e. God the Father) are at least well intentioned attempts to address the issues. But for most young people whose worldviews are formatted more by Tarantino and *Twilight*, such a reaching back to previous paradigms proves insufficient to unintelligible.

The real

news is that there is not as much wild and crazy sex as many seem to think. *Newsweek* reports 80 percent of college students said they had only one or no sexual partners in the past year.

Researchers have found that in the USA about 25 percent of the population adheres to traditional moral meanings, i.e., sex is solely

reserved for marriage. Another 50 percent see sex as something engaged in only within very “meaningful” and “committed” relationships (maybe an occasional “wild” weekend is to be expected and excused). Sex before marriage is OK, especially when marriage is thought to be part of the “near” future. The remaining 25 percent, who are into multiple partners, as many and as often as one can, who see sex as mostly recreational and totally non-committal, are thought by many to be in the majority.

Second virginity clubs and True Love Revolutions (e.g., Harvard's pro abstinence club: “Because you're worth waiting for”) evidence something stirring among the young. They know what research reveals. Casual sex among students produces neither passion nor companionship. “Love for them was not a source of joy.” Jersey Shore Guidos and Guidettes may get it on, but they are not finding love.

Even more revelatory is the finding that what people really want is not wild monkey sex with anyone they meet in a bar, nor endless serial monogamy. “When college students are asked how many sex partners they would like to have over the rest of their lives, the typical response from an overwhelming majority of both men and women is ‘one’.” People really want that one lifelong lover, companion and friend. Young adults need to hear that the lifelong loving relationship championed by church teaching is what most people actually want.

The Catholic vision of transformation in Christ (“God became what we are so we might become what God is” — St. Athanasius, can help a boy or girl grow and develop from an awkward and confused adolescent into a fully alive human being, conscious of choices in the sexual

areas of one's life, virtuous choices that help all of us live happy and healthy and holy and free. Everyone is called to freedom from all that is dehumanizing in the hook up culture, and freedom for making commitments that are authentic, true, lasting and loving.

No one wants to end up like Tiger Woods, John Edwards or Samantha from *Sex and the City*. Nor does anyone want to end up in an unhappy marriage, harnessed to a person he or she has come to despise, all in the name of supposed fidelity to the sacrament of matrimony. The people of God need assistance from the faithful in many ways and walks of life, articulating how sex and marriage unite us in Christ and lead to conversion and consolation. Married lay people would be best to lead this effort. Together the people of God need to produce sound reflections and share wisdom on how to fall and stay in love and then live out the covenant of love pledged at the altar.

This necessarily will include frank and honest discussion of the practice of birth control and the Church will have to be open to the idea that some practice of birth control is good and loving. There's a difference between artificial means of birth control employed by a married couple who are trying to raise three kids on \$30,000 a year and the giving of the pill to the 15 year old cheerleader so she can keep the half-back happy.

Rarely does a Catholic institution of higher education undertake the task of systematically presenting Catholic teaching and aims in all their attractiveness and glory. Too many Catholic students report that all they hear is "Three word Catholic teaching: 'Don't do it.' 'Don't be gay.'" (*Conversations*, Spring 2010, p. 15). To engage and enrich young adults

about the vision of the faith concerning matters of sex and sexuality, we need to do a much better job of communicating the richly nuanced and thoroughly human wisdom of our Catholic tradition.

What the Church actually teaches is chastity, "The successful integration of sexuality within the person." This integration leads to "inner unity" and the personal expression of just and loving relationships. The gift of sex is the power to give of our selves, body and soul, to another in love, which mirrors our relationship with God. Challenging students to experience the sanity and serenity the heroic embrace of chastity offers young adults is a powerful remedy to the chronic confusion and pulverizing pain surrounding the hook up culture in which they are immersed. Here are some suggestions for opening young adult minds to the possibility of making such an embrace

1) **Converse with them about development in discipleship:** Peter didn't have it all together from day one. Nor did Mary Magdalene. None of us do. The church calls us all to grow in Christ. Fidelity to Christ in matters sexual is a process, not a product. Tell them the truth: Sex is like baseball; errors are part of the game.

2) **Challenge Drunkenness:** College is the only institution where public intoxication is still acceptable. Point out that the alcohol soaked party nights in college mask their true selves and only benefit the idols and profit margins of Smirnoff, Bacardi, and Bud Light. College-age people need to learn how to relate while sober. No one wants to find the future mother or father of his or her children while four sheets to the wind. And Everclear (grain alcohol) served in a clean trash can is always a clear indication you are at the wrong frat party.

3) **Preach a full and flexible Catholicism.** The faith is rooted in our relationship with Jesus. His Holy Spirit develops within us desires for God and service of others. To be Catholic is to be striving to glimpse the grace of God forming our hearts and minds over time. Our God is patient and compassionate. There are many ways of being authentically Catholic.

4) **Lean into the practice of discerning justice.** Every college student wants to be treated fairly. Is what one is doing on multiple party nights throughout the week fair, just, right? Would you want someone doing this with your little brother or sister? If your mother or father were doing what you are doing, would you be cheering, or ashamed? Is all the partying right and just to those paying the tuition bills?

5) **Get real about the seismic changes surrounding the whole "GLBTQ" population.** Although the gay population is nowhere near 10 percent (it's more like 3 percent, a sizable number of people, some 9 million in the USA, self identify as being homosexually oriented in their desires. Homosexual promiscuity must be challenged, as must heterosexual promiscuity, for neither support just or loving relationships. As gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and queer people continue to become more public ly accepted (the military is moving toward dropping "don't ask don't tell"), a church perceived as staunchly, vociferously and rabidly anti-gay will be shunned

Twenty-five percent of the population believes that sex is solely reserved for marriage.

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Fans cheer on their team at Xavier University.

by young adults who know well adjusted and loving homosexual persons, some of whom are family and friends. We all must live up to the teachings of the church that homosexual persons are to be accepted and no discrimination is to be shown towards them.

One way forward: rulebook or recipe? So often arguments about such issues discuss the surface aspects of the behaviors without examining or being aware of the root metaphors that determine one's conclusions concerning these matters. For many, Catholic teaching is a rulebook and any violation of the rules constitutes grounds for a penalty. This fits with an ancient atonement theory of salvation which images God as an angry, vengeful being who must be appeased by our good behavior. Break the rules and

God will cast you into hell, even though God loves you, a theology George Carlin so savagely satirized. Catholic teaching envisioned more as a set of recipes will be very helpful in inviting young people into the practices and power of the faith. Recipes do not mean "anything goes." You cannot put ice cream birthday cake on pizza. Still pizza can come with a variety of toppings. The recipe of Catholic living for young people will involve necessary ingredients, i.e., a real Baptismal commitment, along with a variety of variable toppings: contemplating Jesus in the gospels; experiencing the real presence in the community gathered for Eucharist; finding joy in serving others and treating others with justice; exploring a multitude of spiritualities (e.g., Franciscan and Ignatian to hybrids incorporating

insights from world religions). Young adults need to learn how to discern the choices that lead us toward or away from being in tune with the energies of love. Peace and happiness mark our realization that we are in tune with God's grace and action our lives.

Until young adults find a way to Christ in terms that make sense to them in their cultural milieus, a way offering freedom from the absurdity of the hook up scene, there is little chance of attracting them to the table where we receive the Body of Christ, our food for "the Way." Pull out the recipes, get cooking and invite the young to dinner. College kids love pizza. ■

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